Chinese Urban Community Construction as a Grassroots Governance Strategy: Social Capital with Chinese Characteristics

Min Zhao

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Centre for Asian Studies

School of Social Sciences

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Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS I

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES III

ABSTRACT V

DECLARATION VII

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT VIII

LIST OF ACRONYMS IX

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 COMMUNITY IN THE INDUSTRIALIZATION PROCESS AND CHINESE COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION 31

3 SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CHINESE URBAN COMMUNITIES 75

4 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TRUST IN CHINESE URBAN COMMUNITIES 112

5 COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTIONS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION 156

6 THE PARTY BRANCH SYSTEM IN COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION 196

7 CHINESE DEMOCRATIZATION AND URBAN COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION AS A STRATEGY OF GRASSROOTS GOVERNANCE 228

8 CONCLUSION 276

APPENDIX 1 QUESTIONNAIRE OF COMMUNITY SOCIAL CAPITAL 281

APPENDIX 2 STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS 298

BIBLIOGRAPHY 301

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 1-1 SOCIAL INTERACTION AMONG RESIDENTS IN A RESIDENTIAL BUILDING IN BEIJING 11

TABLE 1-2 INTRODUCTION OF VISITED COMMUNITIES 23

TABLE 1-3 COMMUNITIES IN WHICH QUESTIONNAIRES WERE DISTRIBUTED 25

TABLE 1-4 AGE COHORT OF RESPONDENTS OF SELECTED COMMUNITIES 25

TABLE 3-1 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN 143 VICTIMS AND THEIR BEGUILERS IN PYRAMID SALES IN DATE REQUIRED (SHI AND TENG 2011) 96

TABLE 3-2 ATTITUDES OF DIFFERENT GENERATIONS TOWARDS LAWS AND KINSHIP 100

TABLE 4-1 SURVEY OF 'THE PERSONS OUTSIDE THE HOME THAT YOU FEEL CLOSEST TO' IN TORONTO (N = 845) (WELLMAN 1979) 126

TABLE 5-1 TYPES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION (YANG 2007) 161

TABLE 7-1: QUESTION: WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON "INDIVIDUAL STRUGGLE"? (BURTON AND REITZ 1981, P. 61, QUOTED FROM CHAN 2000, P. 210) 246

TABLE 7-2: QUESTION: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON "INDIVIDUALISM"? (MICHELSON 1976, P. 38, QUOTED FROM CHAN 2000, P. 211) 247

TABLE 7-3: INVESTIGATION ON THE CONDITION OF POLITICAL THINKING IN SHANGHAI UNIVERSITIES IN 1996 (WHYTE 1956, P. 17, QUOTED FROM CHAN 2000, P. 225) 247

TABLE 7-4 DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGSS OF DEMOCRACY (SHI & LU, 2010, P. 128) 249

TABLE 7-5: QUESTION: WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING VALUES IS MOST IMPORTANT? (DOWD, CARLSON *ET AL.* 2000, P. 194) 249

FIGURE 5-1 AGE LEVELS OF COMMUNITY WORKERS IN BEIJING 2008 177

FIGURE 5-2 EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS OF COMMUNITY WORKERS IN BEIJING 2008 178

FIGURE 6-1 COMMUNITY ADMINISTRATION STRUCTURE OF SHENHE DISTRICT (CHEN 2004, PP. 193-194) 215

FIGURE 6-2 COMMUNITY ADMINISTRATION STRUCTURE OF RUIJIN ERLU, LUWAN DISTRICT (CHEN 2004, PP. 193-194) 172

ABSTRACT

Since 1978, the implementation of reform agenda and opening up policy, China has undergone the most rapid economic change and along with a significant urbanization process, which has changed the social, political and cultural structures of Chinese society. However, social transition along with urbanization has caused widespread social problems and citizen dissatisfaction, to the point of threatening the Communist Party's (CCP) political legitimacy. To address this political decline the CCP organised a grassroots form of community-based response, titled the Community Construction Project in urban China. This was a top-down project designed to solve or at least ease many social problems caused by rapid urbanisation, the decline in the welfare policies associated with the *danwei* (work-unit, 单位) and to reaffirm support for the CCP within the community. It was also hoped that this would assist in, keep the society stable and peaceful in a period where material inequality was growing. This process can be read as top-down but reality has involved many social actors, such as governments at all levels, scholarly engagement in applied and theoretical research, social organizations and community residents. Therefore its actual practice and outcomes vary according to concrete social and material settings due to the interaction among these different actors.

To understand the community construction project and its potential impacts on the future of Chinese society, this research systematically analyses the measures employed in urban community construction. Since community construction is an organized project, covering many aspects of community life, research on it requires a perspective relevant to all those aspects and not one that seeks to impose a formalistic Western version of community on China. In this thesis, the theory of social capital has been selected to combine community social networks, social trust, community participation, community autonomy and Chinese democracy in a coherent framework for analysing the present political conditions. It examines the Western concept of social capital and reveals how it is reconceptualised in theory and practice in China to include the Party-state rather than the inappropriate concept of a civil society divorced from the State, as

theorised by Western social capital theorists. These aspects of community life, that are related to and influenced by each other, are used as an indicator of social capital but show that in China they have clear Chinese characteristics, which the participants are fully aware of. It is reflective social capital, one that build networks and trust but one where the role of the CCP is fully apparent.

The concrete measures of Chinese urban community construction, which are undertaken mainly by Community Residents' Committees and engaged with those aspects and employed during community construction, are here analysed separately according to data collected through field work conducted in seven communities of Nanjing, China. Questionnaires about residents' attitudes towards neighbourhood relationships, community participation, trust and other issues related to the project of community construction were distributed to community residents as an indicative form of evidence to support the broader theoretical findings. Interviews were conducted with heads of selected Community Residents' Committees about the current conditions of their communities and their understanding of community construction.

The conclusion of this research shows that the community construction project, whose aims were to reshape the State-society relation, strengthening social stability and government control, relieving the government burden and improving grassroots governance, however, provides only limited improvement in building community social networks, trust, community participation and community autonomy. The analysis suggests that this less than optimum outcome is due specifically to government policies and policy implementation that operates from a perspective that the Party-State and civil society are as one. Nevertheless, the process did open up a space for debates over community power, which was divorced from a Western version of democracy but was meaningful in the social, material and political context of China in this period of rapid modernization and urbanisation.

DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CRC: Community Residents' Committee

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

MoCA: The Ministry of Civil Affairs

NGO: Non-government organizations

SOE: State-owned enterprise